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THOUGHTS ON THE IDEA OF A FIRST CAUSE¹

EDOUARD MONTET

University of Geneva, Switzerland

The author of this study is neither a theologian nor a philosopher. He is an orientalist and a historian of religions who has directed his attention more especially to the religious problems of the Moham-medan world. He has, however, always had the keenest interest in philosophical questions of a religious and metaphysical nature, and it is because his mind has felt itself drawn continually to this line of research that he has decided it to be good for himself—and perhaps useful to others as well—to write out the following thoughts on a subject which he has long pondered.

At the present time, the philosophical problems which receive the most attention are those connected with psychology. But the questions raised by metaphysics still deserve an equal attention, for they have a most vital bearing upon life. Whatever view we may hold in ethics or in philosophy, whatever theories we may formulate about the universe—whether as materialists, positivists, transcendentalists, or agnostics—there yet remain certain questions which have power to compel the attention of all save the most indifferent or the most decided: such questions as, “Is there a First Cause?” and “What tomorrow follows death?”

These questions present themselves to us whether we wish them or not; they beset us with the persistence of a fixed idea, and sooner or later force most of us to ponder them seriously. To a study of the first of these questions—the question as to a First Cause—we propose to devote the following pages, considering the problem in its broadest possible bearings, and in the most modern spirit of investigation.

We have subsisted for a long time in Europe on a readymade system of metaphysics, with its *proofs* of the existence of God, and its *demonstration* of the immortality of the soul. The men of my generation (which indeed still seems to belong to an age of

¹ Translated by Carleton Ames Wheeler.

transition in philosophical thought) received in their youth an instruction fitted out with a priori proofs and demonstrations. I myself had, in the great national college where I studied, one of the most distinguished professors of philosophy, who gave us for intellectual nourishment what was called by the vague, but at that time almost universally accepted name, "mental philosophy" (*la philosophie spiritualiste*).

If the so-called "mental" school of philosophy has had its day and no longer makes a noise in the world, there yet remain the readymade metaphysics and theodicies of the religions and of the churches. Considering, for example, merely the countries of Europe and America, we must place under this head the Catholic, the Protestant, and the Jewish metaphysics, in which, alongside the great traditional currents of the stream, the waters of the liberal thought, freed from all tradition, must take their separate way. The metaphysics of the great majority of the followers of these religions is a thought-system drawn from symbols, creeds, decrees of councils or synods, etc. In brief, it is derived from a very miscellaneous collection of documents which give expression to the particular dogmas of each church (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish).

The most recent treatises on Christian dogma are in the form of a deep study of the ecclesiastical dogmas, and are, for the most part, attempts at interpretation, enlargement, and systematization of these formulas, to which formulas are attached a respect and an interest made even greater by the fact that they are, for the most part, the result of secular intellectual effort and the expression of faiths which have been, at a given moment in history, the faiths of entire nations.

It is not at all these traditional teachings which lend the inspiration for the study we have in hand. All our effort will be bent to the examination of the problem of the first cause, in a spirit of entire freedom from religious or philosophic tradition.

I

The idea of first cause presents itself under many and surprisingly varied forms, for we find it everywhere—in experiences which we have every day of our lives, in the most dissimilar facts, in the

most diverse doctrines, and even in theories which appear or pretend to be a denial of it.

Hence arise the very different names given to the "first cause." In the religions and in a large number of philosophical systems, it is called God—a word used to express very diverse notions. Elsewhere, it is given the name of force, of power, of movement, of life, or of matter. For it is quite evident that, in putting at the foundation of one's explanation of the universe movement or matter, for example, one is thereby giving to movement or matter the rank of first cause, however much one may deny such a conception. This statement we shall work out farther on. Finally, it is elsewhere—or, to speak more correctly, as it seems to us—everywhere given the name of ideal (an idea in itself complex and rich in meanings); and in a seemingly endless variety of ways it receives the name of duty. If such diverse names as these can be applied to the idea of first cause, it is because the religious fact which is a sort of practical translation of this notion—or, if you prefer, the adequate expression of it—is of a general nature.

This obliges us to establish, in the first place, the universality of the religious fact or sentiment,² and consequently the universality of religion,³ which is its manifestation to the senses. Religion is a human fact, or, as Benjamin Constant has said, an indefectible and perfectible attribute of our species. That is to say that the religious sense, which is at the foundation of religion, is universal.

It is true, this universality has been denied, and in support of this denial there has been invoked the existence of savage or half-civilized peoples said to be without religion. As Albert Réville has remarked, "The reports of travellers concerning peoples claimed by them to have been found without any sort of religion should be accepted only with the greatest caution; too often they base their conclusions either upon inexact information, or upon very superficial observation. There is already a large number of tribes,

² We define the religious sentiment as a feeling of dependence which we experience with regard to a power above us.

³ We define religion as the direction given to human life by the feeling of dependence which man experiences in the face of a power above himself. We can also define it as the determining of our life by the feeling of satisfaction which unites us to this power.

relatively speaking, about whom such a statement was made, but in reference to whom a later examination, more observant and better directed, has brought to light just the contrary.”⁴

During a long visit which gave us opportunity to become acquainted with some Indian groups settled in the northern part of Patagonia, we ourselves discovered the grave errors one can fall into along this line, if with superficial haste one denies all religious feeling to some half-civilized or savage tribes in South America. The Indians with whom we came into contact appeared to have neither religious ideas nor religious customs. We had observed among them no trace of any worship of spirits, and we asked ourselves whether, in fact, we were not in the presence of a people without religion. It was not long, however, before we noticed among them certain superstitious practices which were the evident indication of an obscure religious sense, or, to use a favorite phrase of S. Reinach (in his *Orpheus*), “scruples limiting the free exercise of their faculties,” and undeniable witnesses to the most primitive form of religion. These curious superstitious practices had to do with unlucky numbers, and may briefly be illustrated.

An Indian wishes to buy a horse from Don X, who asks him 15 piasters for it; this price he refuses to pay but agrees to give 16 piasters. Don Z, in bargaining for the services of an Indian, offers him 15 piasters a month; the Indian refuses, but accepts the place as servant (*péon*) at a wage of 14 piasters a month. Two Indians from Chili arrive one day at the *estrancia* of Maraco, where I was staying; both are in extreme poverty and wish to engage for a year’s work. Don E offers them 120 piasters; this they refuse, but agree to a wage of 100 piasters. The strange debate between master and servants lasted a long time, so great was our difficulty in understanding the point of view of the Indians. There was, however, no (lingual) misunderstanding: one of the Indians spoke Spanish, and we had, besides, a Gaucho who knew Puelche (the dialect spoken by the two Indians), and who thus served as our interpreter. The contract was finally made on the basis of 100 piasters salary, and I myself signed, in the name of the Indians,

⁴ *Prolégomènes de l’histoire des religions* (Paris, 1881), 45.

the agreement exchanged between the two parties. In all this there were neither deceivers nor deceived; it was only a case of some poor fellows for whom certain numbers had a sinister meaning, under certain given circumstances—in this case, perhaps, merely from the fact that they had been proposed by Europeans. If we had insisted on 120 piasters, the Indians would have looked elsewhere for work. These strange practices are only explicable by what I will call a hidden religious thought—*une arrière-pensée religieuse*.

Doubtless the universality of the religious sense does not at all prevent there being atheists—men irreligious or unreligious—just as the physical law of gravitation, by virtue of which everything not firmly resting on the ground is inevitably destined to fall to the earth, does not prevent the existence of balloons and aeroplanes. Theoretically, one might even imagine a balloon always inflated, or an aviator always in motion; but even so they would represent merely an apparent contradiction of the law of attraction, for they would be obeying the general principle of gravitation. Albert Réville has well said,⁵ “Do not give to the exception a value so great as to cause a misconception of the characteristic traits of the whole.” Theoretically, moreover, there is an explanation for every exception; hence the popular saying that the exception proves the rule. The innumerable blind or paralyzed persons on humanity’s list do not prevent sight from being a human sense, in the broadest and most general acceptance of the word, nor movement of the joints from being a characteristic of the human race as a whole. This universality of the religious feeling and of religion explains to us the great variety of forms under which the idea of first cause presents itself (as enumerated above)—forms which we shall now study one by one.

II

Let us look first at the idea of *force* or *power*, considered as sovereign, above ourselves, and arousing in us the feeling of our dependence upon it.

This sovereign force manifests itself in Nature. Nature pre-

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 47.

sents a chain of phenomena each link of which is inseparably bound to the next, in the relation of cause to effect, of antecedent to consequent—a series reaching back to infinity across the millenniums of our earth's history. It matters little here what one understands by infinite, or absolute infinity (in its metaphysical sense), or the indefinite extending without perceptible or known barrier in time or in space. The series of phenomena runs back till lost to view in the mists of time, and we are unable to assign to it any beginning, except by using some theory entirely hypothetical, or by setting an arbitrary point of departure at a given moment in its course. Even if one is loth to accept the idea of cause, there remains nevertheless the closely linked series of natural phenomena and facts, one depending on the other, succeeding each other by virtue of a law of fate, and extending back to infinity.

We shall not discuss the theoretical question of knowledge, whether or not one can run from cause to cause back to infinity; this ancient proof of the existence of God is without value, because it rests on a notion (Absolute Infinity) which cannot be defined or verified. We shall simply state that Nature leads us always from a consequent back to an antecedent which explains the consequent, and continues the series indefinitely into past time. Every phenomenon has, in this sense, not only a cause which precedes it, but an indefinite series of previous causes. Does this indefinite series lead us to an initial cause, to a point of departure? I cannot say; but what I do know is, that this indefinite series of causes, each successively determining the next, and stretching out through time—this immeasurable causal-past, if one may use the phrase, and consequently causal-future—is only the form of a sovereign power above me, a force to which I am absolutely subject, and which is for me the manifestation of that which I call the divine.⁶

This sovereign force shows itself in history. The serial connection of events is seen in history like that of phenomena in Nature, leading back indefinitely through the course of history to what we, in our ignorance, call the beginnings of humanity. Historical events are closely tied one to the other in a related order, consequent

⁶ We do not touch in this essay upon the question of divine personality.

following antecedent, and effect cause. This causal-linking is very striking in the historical development of nations, whether we are dealing with their increasing size, progress, and grandeur, or whether the question concerns their lessening numbers, their recoil, and decadence. A power higher than they seems to preside over their destinies, a power which may be thought of as providential (God directing the course of history and of humanity), or which may be adjudged to be a blind force, in virtue of which nations are now elevated to the foremost place, now debased to the lowest rank. The fact that a power above the will of men rules their existence, this fact confronts us, whether we wish it or not, and imposes on us the absolute obligation to bow before it.

In spite of all possible denials, we are all nevertheless persuaded that humanity, from its earliest hour even to its most distant future, has been and will be subject to the law of progress. Notwithstanding all the backward turns, all the wars of devastation, all the plagues and all the evils of the physical, moral, political, and social order, in the course of all the reactions and of all the revolutions, humanity marches forward and improves, and this progress should, as it seems to us, continue indefinitely in time and in space.

On the one hand, then, we must conceive a sovereign power which rules history and manifests itself in the unbreakable chain of historic events; on the other, the law of humanity's progress, apparently undeniable; and both are the expression of a force above ourselves, under which we feel that we have been placed as dependents. This is the power which we call divine.

III

Let us examine next the idea of *movement* and of *life*, on the one hand, and the idea of *matter*, on the other, considered each as a concept put forth in solution of the enigma of the world, thereby serving as the explanation of the universe.

First, the idea of motion and of life. The most striking, the most general, the primordial fact, everywhere and always seen, both in the earth below and in the heavens above, is motion, including life. Both are distinct forms of one and the same thing.

Movement and life are seen everywhere: in the mineral kingdom, in the vegetable kingdom, in the animal kingdom, and, if we pass from the earth to the universe, in the starry world. The celestial worlds move and change; they live. The mineral kingdom is full of activity (molecular movement, movements of the surface of the earth and of its depths, movements of the oceans and of the streams of water, volcanic eruptions, chemical reactions, phenomena of heat, electricity, etc.): everywhere is movement and life. And the same is true of the vegetable and of the animal kingdoms. This fact is so striking and so general that we cannot conceive of the earth which we inhabit or of the universe which surrounds us, without movement and life.

If everything, in a final analysis, may be reduced to motion and life, what does this mean, if not to give to the idea of motion and of life the value of an idea explanatory of the universe? The universe is inexplicable apart from motion and life. These, therefore, appear to me as forms of the idea of first cause.

Let us pass on to the idea of matter. According to the materialistic hypothesis, matter is considered as the foundation of everything, as the primitive element on which everything is rooted, to which everything returns, at last; so that everything which exists is formed by the infinitely varied modifications of matter. As has long been pointed out, the idea of matter is an abstract idea; matter is a pure abstraction. We find in Nature minerals, vegetables, animals, etc.—bodies of the most varied and the most dissimilar composition, materials of the most diverse and divergent formations; but as to “matter,” we find it nowhere, it is never met with. The idea of matter thus becomes an idea essentially belonging to the realm of mind. It is the expression of a general notion, of a theoretical hypothesis. If one admits this hypothesis, the idea becomes the expression of a universal principle, and as such is equivalent to the idea of cause, beyond which one does not need to pass—that is to say, an idea of first cause.

IV

Let us now consider *the ideal* and *duty* as forms of the divine. In all domains, especially in the domain of art and in those of the

moral, mental, and religious life, the ideal is an absolute. There is nothing in these different fields of action worthy of being lived except the human life which aspires to an ideal. We know that we shall never reach this ideal, because it is absolute, a hypothetical state of perfection. Nevertheless, we do not cease to place it as the goal of our efforts, to hold it up to our intellectual gaze, to present it for the acceptance of our will—an inaccessible goal, we are convinced, yet the source of voluntary acts repeatedly renewed and ever becoming more decisive.

Life has no value except through this ideal, which becomes the motive power of our existence. A life without an ideal is low, shallow, limited, face to face with the earth; it is like a pinioning, a burial, or an imprisonment of our will. Art without an ideal is only a trade; mental, moral, or religious life without an ideal is only the habitual, and in a way the mechanical, play of the faculties and feelings of a human being. To live on an ideal, in one's personal existence and in one's creative hours, is to live not only a superior life, but one almost superhuman. This is what is meant in common speech when, in reference to an artist, to a literary or a scientific man, to a philanthropist or to a saint (in religion), we say that he "lives in the clouds."

The ideal in the religious life belongs to the same category: it is a state of moral and religious perfection to which one ever aspires, without ever reaching it. The Christian mystics, men with the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi (and they are found in all the churches, in the liberal ranks as well as in the most traditionally orthodox), are striking examples of the need of the ideal, always felt and never fully satisfied, to whatever moral, mental, or religious height the saint may raise himself. The ideal, inasmuch as it represents the absolute, in whatever domain we consider it, is an expression of the divine.

Duty is another form of the absolute, giving us another expression of the divine. This is so true, that we easily speak of the religion of duty, an expression which signifies that man owes an absolute obedience to that which he considers to be his duty. The man led by duty (and he is found everywhere, in all the reli-

gions, in all the types of atheism and of positivism), seeks for the realization of an absolute; in this sense he is a religious man. The religion of duty forms, in fact, in very many cases, a veritable worship of the absolute: the sublime acts of devotion, inspired by an imperious duty from which one does not wish to free one's self, can be counted by the millions. Millions of human beings expose themselves, at the call of duty, to suffering, to mutilation, and to death.

And what shall we say of the religion of patriotism, for which so many men have sacrificed their lives? To give up voluntarily one's life, to give it up by an act of absolute self-denial, to give it up instantly, if necessary, and at the cost of untold physical pain, of untold tearing of the heart strings, to give it up on the field of battle, by a sudden and irrevocable decision—is not this the giving of one's self up to the worship of the absolute? When one speaks of sacrifice upon the altar of one's country, this figure of speech is not a flower of rhetoric: it is the expression of a vivid reality. The religion of patriotism is no empty phrase.

What shall we say finally of the worship of science? For there is duty in the realm of science; and what shall we say of the sacrifice of life made by so many learned men for the sake of the advancement of human knowledge? Here also, there is a religion, a sort of superhuman effort to seize an absolute. Duty becomes invested with diverse forms, in the individual life, but everywhere it is and it remains duty and, as such, it is a form of the absolute, and hence an expression of the divine.

The idea of an absolute, therefore, is not the possession of the religious man alone; he is not the only one who has the feeling of something above him which rules over him. At the side of the man who strives to fulfil his duty, and of the man who pursues the ideal (of whom we have just spoken and who in other domains has the same experiences of the absolute as the religious man) there is the man of science, whose experience leads to the same result. The scientific man, indeed, has the very clear sense of the endless progress to which science points. For knowledge appears to us to be without limits, and our energies are bent to penetrate ever farther into this limitless region. This absence of limits in the

knowledge which man can gain about the universe and about all that it contains, this is what religious souls conceive of more especially as the limitless or, in other words, as the divine.

V

To the arguments which we have presented in the preceding pages, all of which are meant to show the necessity for a first cause (all the absolutes which we have enumerated being only different expressions for the idea of the divine), the religious man adds what he calls the inner testimony to the divine. This is the testimony of which the apostle Paul speaks, to whose own religious experience reference is of course made, when he says that God bears witness to himself in us.⁷ This testimony is equivalent to the idea of the divine as something imprinted upon our minds. Is it an innate idea, as the ancient theologians and metaphysicians declare? Is it an idea acquired and received? Is it a prepossession handed down by tradition? Is it a preconceived idea? Is it a pure imagination? It makes little difference what theory is held concerning the existence of this idea in us. The fact is, that the notion exists in the minds of many religious men.

As for myself, if I may refer to my own personal experience, it would be impossible to say where or when I acquired this idea. I drew it in with my mother's milk, so to speak, which amounts to saying that I do not know to what period or to what circumstance to attribute the entrance of this idea into my mind; or, what is the same thing, that ever since I have led a conscious life, this idea has been mine. I have in myself the sense of the divine. I feel this idea closely bound up with my being, inseparately united to the very center of my personality. The mere supposition that this sense could one day be snatched away from my brain or could disappear from it, produces in me, by anticipation, the sensation of emptiness; it would be like the pouring out of the cerebral matter; it would be as if a desert had spread over my mental being, annihilating all my intellectual and moral faculties, and all my feelings.

⁷ Rom. 8:16.

CONCLUSION

The apparently unexpected conclusion which we draw from the preceding thoughts is, that the great problem presented to the human mind is not that of the existence of God. In fact, the result of the considerations which we have here given is, that the idea of first cause imposes itself upon us, even though this first cause cannot be demonstrated like a theorem in geometry. It is of a piece, shall we say, with the mathematical principle of unity, the point of departure and the foundation of the mathematical sciences. In itself this unity is undemonstrable; it is a purely theoretical concept, an abstract idea, an abstraction, in the absolute sense of the word; and yet it is as indispensable to the structure and development of the mathematical sciences as life is to our existence. No mathematician doubts this invisible unity. This is so true, that I have known a great mathematician who founded upon the principle of mathematical unity his belief in God. It is just the same with the first cause, the foundation of the universe and of all that it contains.

If the idea of first cause forces itself upon us, if it appears to each of us personally as evidence, the real problem is not that of the existence of God. The real problem is the wherefore of the first cause. Why is there a first cause? Why does God exist? Or, to make the question more general, why is there existence, and how has existence come to be? In the Christian church there was long ago erected the dogma of the creation *ex nihilo*. What is nothingness? Does nothingness correspond to anything which may exist? Is it indeed a thought, an idea, or simply the shadow of an idea? To these troubling questions, which are quite beyond solution, because they outstrip the forces and limits of our intelligence, the only answer is the anguish of our being, of our mind, of our heart—the disorder of our mental, moral, and emotional faculties!